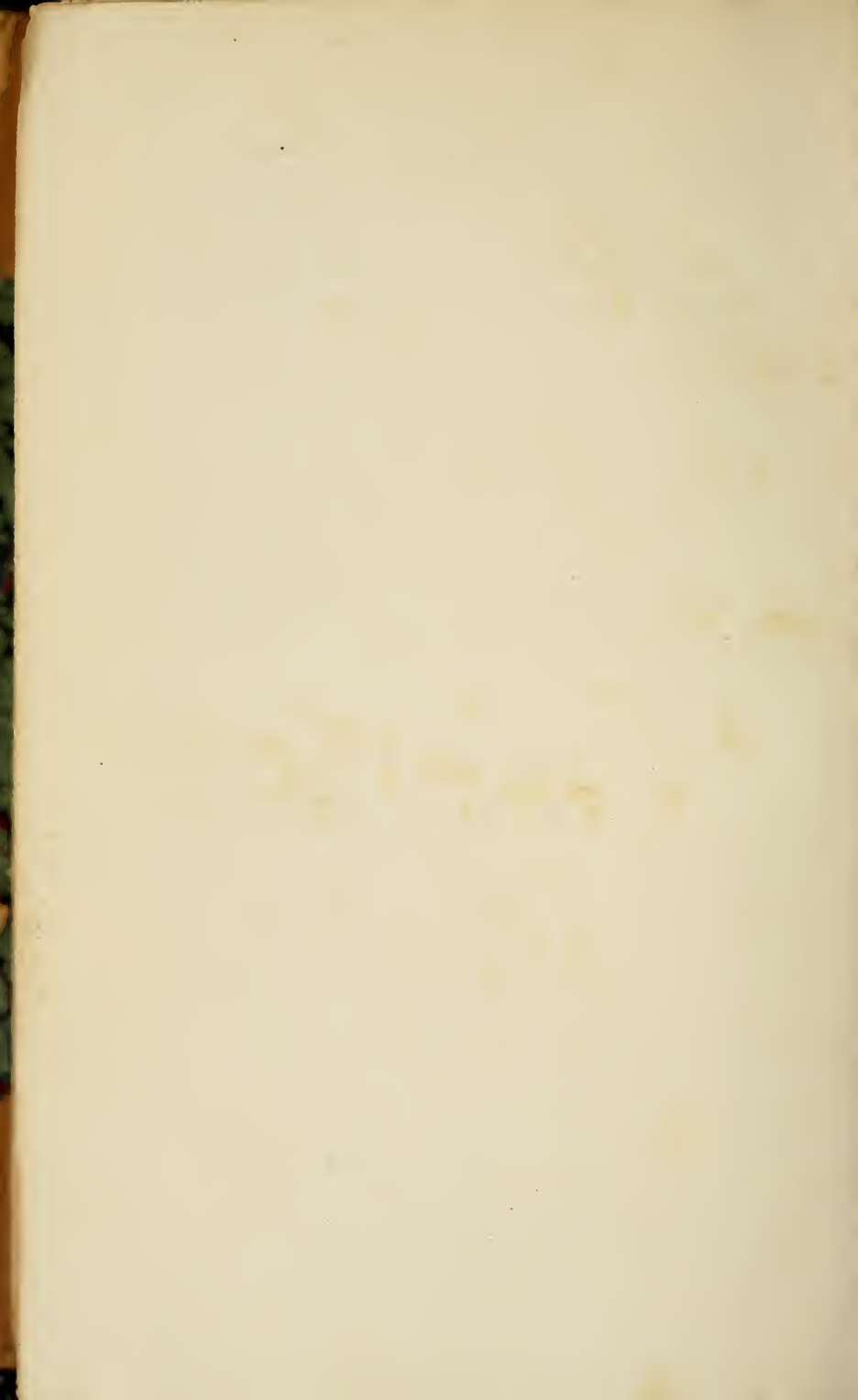






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CHURCH BOARDS IN PARISHES.

A PROPOSAL SUBMITTED TO THE MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL CHURCH
REFORM UNION.

"He that will not apply new Remedies, must expect new Evils."

"THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND" stands, in common talk, for two quite different things. It denotes, on the one hand, a special system of Christian worship and theology, embodied in the Prayer-book; and, on the other, our material Establishment, with its buildings, its organization, and its revenues. The latter is not the property of any sect, but of the English people; or rather it is an aggregate of separate properties—buildings for worship, buildings for teaching, with provision for the men who minister therein—which are the possession of particular districts for a particular purpose: and the purpose is the spiritual welfare of the parishioners within each district. This visible Church of England is the immemorial provision for the worship of God and the advancement of Christian civilization throughout our land—a provision far older than the special system with which it is to-day identified, older even in many parts than that to which the Reformed ritual succeeded.

It has been at one time identified with the ancient traditions of Irish Christianity, at another with the Erastianized Romanism of the Normans; again, with the oscillating tenets of the sixteenth century, with the Arminian system of the Stuarts and the Presbyterian experiment of the Commonwealth. In these successive phases of the fundamental Christianity of our nation, the material provision for its support has been necessarily regulated as to its application and disposition by the State. Not that any human authority can pretend to dictate the one true and final form of dogma: the relations of each soul with God stand in the judgment of the individual conscience. But the State, whether embodied in the paternal government of princes, or the represented will of the people, has to regard the purpose of this sacred provision committed by the piety of successive generations to its charge, and to make or to recognize such regulations as in the ceaseless movement of Christian thought best promise to secure the spiritual welfare of the parishes. It is by this obligation, not for a moment upon the assumption that political authority can dictate a faith, that all ecclesiastical legislation, from the Act of Uniformity downwards, is justified.

In thus committing to the representative legislature of a free people the adjustment of our National Provision for Worship, we assert the principles that Christian truth is not the secret of a priesthood, but the common possession of Christian men, and that it is a vital and a springing power which outgrows all forms, whether of ancient authority or of new devising, and rises before mankind from strength to strength in answer to the ever-widening comprehension of God's works and ways. Individual communion with God and individual responsibility in judgment are the bases of our Christianity, and, where they exist, they will be shackled by no finally dictated system. Our National Church therefore remains such as the representatives of the nation in Parliament have appointed it and maintain it; and the final source of authority in the regulation of this sacred heritage is the whole body of the nation, both clerical and lay.

It is time that this principle, which rules the whole, should be asserted also in the parts; that the usage which prevails in the entire Church should prevail in the individual parish. There the decay of Ecclesiastical discipline has left the minister practically autocratic. Upon existing regulations the clergyman may put what construction he pleases: he may defy, with little fear of restraint, the very Law itself; and in all the work of the Parish, philanthropic as well as ecclesiastical, he may go his way without either conforming to the wishes or engaging the support of his parishioners. It is hard to say whether he or they suffer most from this autocracy. The laity hold aloof from the clergy's work, ignoring their own active duties as Christians. Their affection for the Church grows cold, for they cease to feel that it is *theirs*; so the careless pass into indifference and the active into Dissent. The Clergy, on the other hand, are left in a position of unshared responsibility, which they have not necessarily either the means or the ability to support; while the independence of action to which they are compelled excites the jealousy of the very men who should be helping them. For lack, again, of any authentic representation of the feelings of the parishioners, reform within the Church moves heavily. Abuses continue. The people are alienated. Patronage cannot be dealt with firmly. Improvements in parochial organization or in the conduct of worship are checked; changes, however wise, are received with suspicion and dissatisfaction; whilst, on the other hand, inelastic laws of uniformity dictating to the clergy their opinions, their teaching, their prayers, even their actions and their attitudes, are upheld as the only safeguard against caprice by many who would never allow that such things were essential to our Faith or Worship.

How shall all this be remedied? The influence of the laity, admitted in ecclesiastical legislation, must find expression also in the administration of the Parish. In Church matters, as in all other national interests, the secret of most vigorous effectiveness will be found in the fearless admission of the ancient English principle of Local Self-government.

The old constitutional theory of a Parish was that of a little self-governed community in which the inhabitants dwelt under fixed laws, civil and ecclesiastical, but, subject to those laws, managed their own affairs and property in their own parish meeting or vestry, of which the Parson was the rightful chairman. The parish vestry meeting is still the source and the representative of all parochial authority; but its powers are now in the main delegated to representatives especially selected from it to undertake special departments of the general interests of the parishioners. Thus the care of the poor, and of the highways, and more recently of education within each parish, has been removed from the direct management of the body of the parishioners and committed to special Boards—Boards of Guardians, Highway Boards, and School Boards, the members of which have special aptitude, or can give special attention in the department which they undertake.

But where is the Board which represents the ecclesiastical interests of the parishioners, and how is it that in all connected with their own Church, their worship, and their charities, they are to-day practically powerless?

It is useless to take refuge in legal technicality, and to assert that the church is not theirs but the freehold of the Parson. That

theory, set up for the convenience of Law, is a clumsy translation out of mediæval thought into modern formalities of the *tenure* upon which the Parson occupies the benefice for the discharge of duties towards the parishioners. But in ultimate fact this entire system of Provision for Worship is the possession of those to whose highest welfare it has been consecrated. It is they who find the funds for the repair of the church; it is they who provide its goods, its adjuncts, and its ornaments. Nothing can, by right, be added or removed without the consent of the churchwardens elected in the Vestry meeting to represent the parishioners; and it is the churchwardens, not the Parson, who are responsible before the law for the maintenance of the fabric, the property, and the services of the parish church. Yet the parishioners see all these things changed and tampered with against their inclination, and though they may know they have the right, they have not the machinery to interfere. By immemorial usage, indeed, the parish gathers in Vestry meeting once a year or so for ecclesiastical purposes. Yet the parishioners can effect so little when they get there, that the great majority neither come nor take interest in the proceedings; and thus the most ancient of our popular institutions may often dwindle to a little conference of the parson's friends.

It is the apathy of the laity, quite as much as any self-assertion of the clergy, which has led to the disuse of a system of joint administration so helpful to both. But now that men have awakened to their own responsibility in religious matters, and are daily growing, too, in the habits and experience of Local Self-government, the functions of the laity in the ecclesiastical administration of their parishes must not only be revived, but must be widened, or the Church cannot hold its own in modern society.

It is proposed, therefore, that a standing committee of the parish Vestry for Church purposes should now be constituted—a Church Board, in fact, which shall correspond in status and constitution to the Board of Guardians and the School Board, or, more precisely, to the Select Vestry elected in urban parishes under Hobhouse's Act. Like that, it will be constituted upon the requisition of a certain number of the inhabitants. For parish-churches, and where the endowment is from tithes, from rates, or from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, the Church-board will be elected by the ratepayers; by the contributors, where the endowment is from voluntary contributions, whether in the shape of pew-rents or otherwise. All thus qualified to vote will be eligible for election; the patron, the churchwardens, and the clergy licensed to the church will be *ex officio* members; and, in accordance with immemorial usage, the Parson will be chairman.

This Church Board will become the formal representative of the interests of the Parish in Church matters. It will replace the irresponsible action of the "aggrieved parishioner" in any complaints of illegality, and might in time be allowed a voice in the appointment of incumbents. In the disposition of the Church funds, in sanctioning the acquisition or disposal of Church property, and as to all changes in the churchyard or church, it will receive absolute statutory authority. In other matters also, which are at present left to the minister's discretion, as in the hours, arrangement, and manner of the services, the Church Board will receive a proper voice; no change will be made in such things without the

consent of both the Parson and the Church Board; and on the rare occasions of their disagreement, either party will appeal to the Bishop. With the protection thus provided for the feelings and the consciences of all parties, the often-demanded relaxations in the Act of Uniformity would be conceded, and the services permitted to adjust themselves more freely to the needs of special congregations. It is confidently anticipated that the clergy will perceive how greatly their own hands may be strengthened by appealing spontaneously to the Church Board, even in many matters which would still be fitly reserved to their discretion and their initiative; that the institution would become the organ of the whole religious and philanthropic work of the parish, and the basis for an effective synod representing the Diocese—and ultimately, perhaps, the Church. On the other hand, there need be no fear that the proper spiritual influence of the clergy would be in any way impaired. The Church Board would have no power to encroach upon the *legal* position of the parson, nor authority to dictate to him an iota of his opinions or his teaching.

The proposal, which in such various ways promises to meet every modern demand upon the Church, has been already brought in substance before Parliament in “The Parochial Councils Bill,” which was introduced in 1871 by Lord Sandon and Lord Mount-Temple (then Mr. Cowper-Temple), and was read a second time in the House of Commons. Since then the project has been tried in various places as a voluntary experiment; and at the Sheffield Church Congress (1878) many clergymen warmly commended the successful working of such representative councils within their parishes. They testified to the increased confidence created between incumbent and parishioners; to the better understanding of each other’s feelings and apprehension of each other’s wishes; to the sympathy and the energy developed amongst the laity in Church work; to the facility with which desirable changes in the services or other matters would be effected; in short, to the immeasurable superiority of discussion and persuasion to dictation as a method of parochial management. In no case did it appear that the clergymen who had thus offered authority to the representatives of their people had found their own energies fettered, or their influence otherwise than increased.

Yet these experiments, while witnessing to the solid advantages of the proposal, and answering the common objections to it by the evidence of fact, do not prove that legislation is unnecessary. Without legislation the discretion of the incumbent remains absolute: what is conceded by one minister may be withdrawn by the next; and in the very parishes where the need of such a parochial authority is greatest, it is most unlikely to be granted. The legalized Church Board is in truth the only charter of the constitution, which it is now time for our parishes to demand, not as a gift, to be denied, suspended, or withdrawn, but as a right, upon which they can confidently rely. The future of the National Church of England, like the future of the State, is in the hands of the people. Against the people no institution can be maintained. Such appears the Divine Order in this age, and we must recognize it. We have learnt the lesson in the civil government; and the whole Reform movement is its embodiment. The judgment of the Church also is at hand. See that the People be gathered to its side betimes!





